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Spies who never should have known what they knew

By William V. Kennedy

THERE is a disturbing thread among three of the recent major espionage cases, suggesting that little has been resolved by the jailing of two of the key figures and the defection to Moscow of the third.

Take the case of John A. Walker, Jr., organizer of a ring that operated in the Navy for some 20 years. It has not yet been explained how Walker could have been granted a "top secret" clearance when he had entered the Navy under a form of plea bargaining to avoid a jail sentence for burglary. Inexplicable as was the granting of the clearance, it is even more difficult to understand how he could have been permitted to retain such access when the Navy finally found out about the felony.

At least as strange is the case of Edward Lee Howard who in a brief career of two years in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was given a level of responsibility that apparently enabled him to betray the most sensitive of all US espionage operations — penetration of the Soviet Union itself.

Strange to the point of the bizarre is the case of Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Richard W. Miller. Though known by his associates and supervisors over a period of some 12-15 years to be a man facing serious personal and professional problems, he was nonetheless assigned to one of the most sensitive and demanding posts in the entire FBI — the Soviet Squad of the internal security division in Los Angeles. Worse, it turns out that among the several assignments Miller had been given to get him out of the way, one was to the Los Angeles office "farm," the code room through which pass all communications relating to FBI surveillance of suspected spies and traitors.

If Miller was caught stealing candy bars from the concession stand of the Federal building, as the government charged in the successive trials that led to his conviction, how is it that his supervisors let things get to the point where Miller was openly involved with a Soviet femme fatale whose identity and colorful career were well known to the Bureau?

The answer to that poses yet more compelling questions. Miller got involved with the Soviet agent, the Government acknowledges, because the Soviet lady had been deeply involved with one of Miller's supervisors who retired immediately after the situation came to light. Wasn't any of this noticed in the upper echelons of the FBI? Faith in the FBI upper management is not reinforced by the revelation that one of Miller's supervisors seems to have considered his status as an FBI supervisor and a Mormon bishop as virtually one and the same thing, or by the disclosure that among the "secret" documents Miller supposedly mishandled was a list of the Russian holidays.

The danger inherent in all police work and the severe limitations on communication with "outsiders" tend to foster a "them-and-us" frame of mind that can lead to the administrative "burying" of incompetent and troubled people within an agency lest it be seen as "washing its dirty linen in public." Something such as that seems to have occurred in the case of Mr. Miller, whose conviction after an initial mistrial is now being appealed. Left unresolved are the nagging questions of how the Los Angeles office of the FBI, surely one of the most important, got into this state of affairs in the first place, of whether or not the internal mismanagement that led to the Miller case has been corrected, and of whether or not the supervisors who let things get so wildly out of hand are to get by, scot free.

The fact that these matters were not taken into consideration in granting clearances points up a failure by the Navy to employ the full internal security resources of the government.

Principal among those resources is the work of the Defense Investigative Service, charged with the background investigations that should have turned up Walker's conviction for burglary and permanently barred him from a position of great trust.

One reason why the DIS is many years behind in its legitimate work is the diversion of its time and talent to the punishment of "whistleblowers." This occurs when military administrators bully low-ranking, local DIS agents into covering up waste, fraud, and incompetence through "investigations" tailored to silence or destroy the targeted person.

Supposedly, CIA defector Edward Lee Howard was fired by the agency after failing a polygraph test. But before that he had been entrusted with information so sensitive that, allegedly, his divulgence of that information to the Soviets led to the execution of a Soviet citizen working for the United States. The firing occurred two years after Howard apparently passed an initial polygraph test the CIA routinely administers to all new employees. The public record to date suggests that the CIA placed so much faith in the initial polygraph examination that it granted Howard a level of responsibility far beyond what prudence and common sense would have indicated for one about whom the CIA knew so little.

The connecting thread in all three cases, therefore, is serious internal mismanagement. That should be no surprise since the Soviet Union's KGB has been saying publicly for years that weaknesses in internal US Government management, particularly with respect to Civil Service employees, create conditions ripe for KGB exploitation.

Despite the shocking revelations in recent US espionage cases, there is as yet not the slightest indication that either the White House or the Congress understands the scope of the internal problem or intends to do anything about it.

William V. Kennedy is principal author of "The Intelligence War."